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ABSTRACT

This study attempted to identify efforts to evaluate programs for gifted and talented students in 122 Texas school districts and to compare these practices with those recommended in the literature and with Texas Education Association guidelines. Areas examined included informal and formal assessment of student and teacher identification practices, the grouping component of program organization, the curriculum, staff development, parental and community involvement, and evaluation procedures. Analysis of surveys returned by program directors (N=76) found that in most school districts, program components were assessed both informally and formally; that most programs were assessed on an annual basis; that most used an evaluation committee; that most used a variety of documentation measures; that program evaluation reports were usually distributed to superintendents, principals, and gifted and talented teachers; and that most programs used locally developed evaluation models rather than models described in the literature. It was concluded that first, a variety of assessment approaches is being used and second, program directors are not significantly utilizing the literature in developing local evaluation practices. Includes 25 references. (Author/DB)

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GIFTED AND TALENTED PROGRAM EVALUATION: PRACTICES, PROBLEMS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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GIFTED AND TALENTED PROGRAM EVALUATION: PRACTICES, PROBLEMS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to identify current gifted and talented program evaluation practices in selected Texas school districts. Additionally, the study sought to compare these practices with those recommended in the literature and TEA guidelines. The areas examined in this study included informal and formal assessment of student and teacher identification practices, the grouping component of program organization, the curriculum, the extent of staff development, the extent of parental and community involvement, and the evaluation procedures. Other program assessment practices examined included use of evaluation committees, use of data collection measures, reporting procedures for evaluation findings, and use of program evaluation models.

Based on the findings, the following conclusions were drawn by the researcher as they related to current gifted and talented program evaluation practices. First, there appeared to be a variety of assessment taking place in a majority of the gifted and talented programs that participated in the study, but it was difficult to determine the overall usefulness of these evaluation practices. Secondly, although there was an available body of literature concerning the evaluation of gifted and talented programs, which included specific evaluation models, there was little evidence from this study to suggest that program directors actually relied on this literature in developing their local evaluation practices.

GIFTED AND TALENTED PROGRAM EVALUATION: PRACTICES, PROBLEMS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Public interest in gifted education was sparked in the mid-1970s by the Marland Report, which stated that the gifted "are children who require differential educational programs and services beyond those normally provided by the regular school program in order to realize their contribution to self and society" (U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Labor and Public Welfare, 1972, p. 2). Since that time, gifted education has received additional attention at the state level.

In May 1987, the Texas Legislature required all school districts to establish gifted and talented programs by the 1990-91 school year. The State Board of Education subsequently mandated that gifted and talented programs provide services for students in grades K-12. To comply with this law and these mandates, many school districts have either expanded or begun developing their gifted and talented programs.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Some Texas school districts have had gifted and talented programs in place for at least nine years, and the Texas education Agency has expected these districts to evaluate on a regular basis. Consequently, these school districts have had the potential opportunity to use a variety of program evaluation practices and modify them for optimal use. However, there has been no organized effort to identify the specific practices used in evaluating these programs. The purpose of this study was to identify the current gifted and talented program evaluation practices, and compare these with the practices recommended in the gifted and talented program evaluation literature and in the TEA guidelines.

SIGNIFICANCE

To assist school district officials involved in implementing K-12 gifted and talented programs, the TEA (1981) identified key elements contained in effective programs. These elements, which were also reflected in much of the gifted and talented program evaluation literature, included program planning, identification practices, program organization, curriculum development, staff development, parental/community involvement, and evaluation.

The evaluation component was important because it provided information about program effectiveness, which could then be used to improve the program for the benefit of the gifted and talented children served (Renzulli, 1975; Clark, 1979; Van Tassel, 1980; TEA, 1981; Rimm, 1982; Tuttle and Becker, 1983; and Shwedel, 1983). Although several program evaluation models had been developed, little was known about the actual practices employed in school districts experienced in gifted and talented program evaluation. This information could be especially valuable to school district personnel currently involved in evaluating their existing or soon to be implemented gifted and talented programs.

METHODOLOGY

It was necessary to collect information from school districts experienced in gifted and talented program evaluation. The selected sample consisted of 122 school districts that had been identified by the TEA as possessing exemplary gifted and talented programs during the 1979-80 school year. Whereas exemplary usually denotes outstanding, in this case, it was the term selected by the TEA to indicate state-approved programs. The 1979-80 list was the first and oldest complete listing compiled by the TEA, and it indicated that these districts were among the most experienced in the development of gifted and talented programs.

The method of data collection employed in this study was a questionnaire. The questionnaire was selected for the following reasons: 1) standardization of form, 2)

elimination of interviewer bias, and 3) cost and time-effectiveness due to the geographic distribution of the respondents to be surveyed.

The instrument was designed by the researcher in accordance with recommendations by Dillman (1978) and Westmeyer (1981). It contained 19 items that related to program evaluation recommendations suggested in the gifted and talented program evaluation literature and in The State Plan and Guidelines for the Education of the Gifted/Talented (TEA, 1981). The items dealt with the following topics: 1) age of program, 2) assessment of student and teacher identification practices, 3) assessment of the grouping component of the program organization, 4) assessment of the curriculum, 5) assessment of the staff development efforts, 6) assessment of the parental/community involvement, 7) assessment of the evaluation procedures, 8) use of an evaluation committee, 9) roles represented on the committee, 10) use of the committee's findings for mid-year changes, 11) solicitation of teachers' opinions, 12) dissemination of evaluation findings, 13) documentation strategies used, 14) area of giftedness served according to grade level, 15) total gifted and talented student population, 16) evaluation models used, 17) budgeting for evaluation costs, 18) useful evaluation practices, and 19) useless evaluation practices.

The data collection procedures were patterned after the "total design method" described in Dillman (1978) and those used by Gibbs (1986), Stafford (1985), and Henderson (1984). The questionnaire was administered by mail to the sample.

Treatment of the data was basically patterned after the analysis in Gibbs (1986), Stafford (1985), and Henderson (1984). The responses were tabulated and presented in tables. The data were used as a basis for providing frequency counts, percentages, and cumulative percentages. The tables were summarized through discriptional analysis. The collected data were discussed and compared with recommendations from the literature and TEA guidelines.

RESULTS

Data were obtained through a questionnaire developed for this study and administered by mail to a sample of Gifted and Talented program directors from 122 Texas school districts. The responses of the program directors in this study were anonymous and confidential. A total of 76 completed questionnaires were returned for a response rate of 62 percent.

SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS

The following is a summary of the findings of this study as compiled by the researcher.

1. In the majority of school districts, the gifted and talented program components were assessed both informally and formally. Those assessments most often focused on student and teacher identification practices, the grouping component of program organization, the curriculum, the extent of staff development efforts, the extent of parental and community involvement, and the evaluation practices. It was also found that nearly one-fourth of the districts did not evaluate any component of their gifted and talented programs.

2. Of the programs that were evaluated, most were assessed on an annual basis. The remainder of the programs were evaluated at varying frequencies, which ranged from two to five years or as a perceived need became evident. Among all programs, there was a slightly greater reliance on informal rather than formal evaluation practices.

3. An evaluation committee was used in a majority of the programs, although neither the literature nor the TEA suggested such a practice. The individuals most frequently represented on such committees included program coordinators, teachers, principals, parents, and counselors.

4. In the majority of programs, a variety of documentation measures were used in the evaluation process, as recommended in both the literature and the TEA guidelines. The

most frequently used documentation measures included observations, questionnaires, standardized tests, and criterion-referenced tests.

5. The individuals most frequently receiving the program evaluation reports included superintendents, principals, and gifted and talented teachers. None of the programs disseminated results of the evaluation to students, even though students were included as evaluation committee members in nearly one-quarter of the programs.

6. The majority of programs used locally developed evaluation models rather than one of the models available in the literature.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the analysis and interpretation of the data, the following conclusions were drawn by the researcher as they relate to current gifted and talented program evaluation practices.

1. There appeared to be a variety of assessment taking place in a majority of the gifted and talented programs that participated in this study, but it was difficult to determine the overall usefulness of these evaluation practices. Although consistency among school districts' evaluation practices did not necessarily need to exist, there was an apparent lack of continuity concerning specific evaluation practices, frequency of assessment, program components examined, types of documentation measures used, and reporting of the findings. The lack of continuity raised questions about the comprehensive nature of these evaluations and their practical applications for serious program improvement.

2. Although there existed a body of literature concerning the evaluation of gifted and talented programs, which included specific evaluation models, there was little evidence from this study to suggest that program directors had actually relied on this literature in developing their local evaluation practices.

OBSERVATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The following observations and implications were noted by the researcher as they related to current gifted and talented program evaluation practices. Speculations were based on the researcher's knowledge of the data and discussion with other professional educators.

A number of issues are apparent, most of which are difficult to resolve without the collection and analysis of additional data. For example, some districts include students on evaluation committees but do not make results of the evaluation available to them. This procedure raises the question of whether students are genuinely participating members or simply tokens. On the other hand, disseminating negative results to students could create serious problems. Thus, the degree to which students should be involved in the evaluation process is complex and difficult to resolve. These issues were related to 1) informal and formal program evaluation practices, 2) program evaluation committees, 3) student representation on program evaluation committees, 4) various documentation measures, 5) reporting the evaluation findings, 6) program evaluation models, and 7) local budgeting for program evaluation.

Informal and Formal Program Evaluation Practices

Program evaluation practices can be divided into two categories: formal and informal. Formal evaluation is preplanned, systematic, and based on data collected from a representative sampling, which are analyzed and interpreted; whereas, informal evaluation is much more intuitive, impressionistic, and usually undocumented. Informal evaluation is used in many areas of education and is probably the type of assessment most often used by teachers as they plan lessons and interact with students in the classroom. These teachers are constantly looking for behavioral cues to indicate clarity of their explanations, students' additional information needs, overall student understanding, and students' ability to perform learning tasks successfully. Administrators also use informal evaluation. They observe

classrooms to identify teachers and students who are consistently engaged in meaningful learning activities, students who are actively participating in lessons, and classrooms where pleasant learning environments are exemplified.

Many program directors apparently agree that informal assessment is useful since it is used by a majority of the districts. In this study, many districts reported conducting only informal rather than formal evaluation of their programs. Although informal evaluation is useful and popular, it lacks the planned and systematic documentation necessary for future examination and accountability. Yet, informal evaluation can often identify strengths, weaknesses, and improvement needs that could possibly be verified through formal evaluation. As responsible educators and program administrators, program directors should consider shifting some of their evaluation emphasis from informal to formal assessment and plan for systematic, documented evaluation to verify any program strengths and weaknesses.

A consensus of the literature indicated that program evaluation should assess the effectiveness of the program and provide a basis for making program improvements (Clark, 1979; Carter and Hamilton, 1985; Stake, 1967; Stufflebeam, 1971; Provus, 1969; Renzulli and Ward, 1969; Parke and Buescher, 1982; Kitano and Kirby, 1986; Renzulli, 1975; Shwedel, 1983; Tuttle and Becker, 1983; Van Tassel, 1980; and TEA, 1981) . The author believes that an integral part of program evaluation concerns the collection and analysis of data for accountability and as a record of previous program improvements for future reference. To the extent that approximately one-quarter of the districts in this study fail to assess any of the program components, this relative lack of emphasis suggests that some program directors may place relatively little value on program evaluation. Their feelings may be due to the time, energy, or resources required. Whether or not program evaluation is effective and worthwhile depends on the degree of seriousness and commitment educators are willing to dedicate to this process. It seems to the author and is suggested in the literature that directors should be interested in evaluating their programs because the

process of evaluation has the potential to result in the identification of program strengths and weaknesses.

With increased emphasis on accountability in education, it seems that directors who are responsible for special programs funded by the state should also be able to justify their existence, if required to do so, in the future. Although this justification is not its primary purpose, regular program assessment, both informal and formal, might provide data necessary to assist administrators in this task.

The lack of evaluation in many districts raises the question of whether special funding for gifted and talented programs should be continued for programs that fail to assess their effectiveness. Policymakers may feel compelled to consider replacing recommendations with requirements that relate funding to assessment of program effectiveness. Admittedly, policies that require evaluation could result in ritualistic behavior in which districts go through the motions in order to satisfy the bureaucracy but with little or no ultimate effect to the programs. On the other hand, the properly implemented assessment process could benefit the districts and programs.

Although mandating program evaluation is one realistic option, the key to voluntary, regular program evaluation seems to lie in educating and convincing program administrators that evaluation is worth the time and effort it requires. Education agencies should identify and recognize programs with outstanding informal and formal evaluation practices that have resulted in useful accountability data and specific program improvements. These districts could exemplify the importance of program evaluation to other program administrators. In addition, workshops could be conducted by education agencies to train teachers of the gifted and talented and administrators in the use of specific techniques and models for program evaluation. This training could strengthen the directors' expertise and provide for regional resource centers for the purpose of gifted and talented program evaluation. This recommendation, however, would be contingent on agreement of criteria for identifying such exemplary evaluation practices and cost benefit analyses.

Program Evaluation Committees

Although a majority of the programs surveyed utilized an evaluation committee, some programs are evaluated solely by the program director. The practice of using a single appraiser may be based on the directors' perception 1) that evaluation should be the responsibility of the director or 2) that committees are troublesome and time consuming to organize and manage. Other possible reasons for not using committees include 3) the degree of commitment voluntary members might exhibit, 4) time delays related to coordinating committee members' schedules, 5) differences of opinion concerning assessment procedures or interpreting the findings, 6) lack of expertise in gifted and talented education policies and practices non-educator committee members possess, and 7) potential erosion of the director's control over the evaluation process. These concerns are valid, but there are potential benefits to establishing a committee that should be considered.

There are many components in a gifted and talented program, and the director may not possess expertise in each of these areas. For example, a director may be familiar with differentiated curriculum but lack expertise in the grouping of students for gifted and talented instruction. Consequently, the director could form a committee consisting of various roles involved in and affected by each of the program's components. The committee could be helpful in collecting, interpreting, and/or reporting the evaluation data. Committee members could be selected based on their perspective or association with certain aspects of the program. For example, teachers of the gifted and talented may be able to assist in identifying needs and evaluating the curriculum and grouping component of the program organization, and counselors may be helpful in assessing the student identification practices of the program. Other roles represented may include building administrators, parents, community members, local board members, and students (TEA, 1981). These committee members may provide an unbiased perspective to the evaluation process. A committee may also provide additional opportunities for parents, community members, and others to be more involved in and, hopefully, supportive of the gifted and talented program.

To be sure, program evaluation can be conducted by one person. However, the input and participation of a variety of individuals representing differing perspectives has the potential to enhance the program evaluation process. Consequently, even though the use of an evaluation committee is not mandated presently, programs evaluated solely by the director and programs currently planning to implement evaluation practices should consider the potential benefits of using an evaluation committee.

Student Representation on Program Evaluation Committees

Although students may not always be the beneficiaries of program evaluation, it is clear from the literature that students should be involved in the program evaluation process. This raises the questions of whether or not students should be active members of the evaluation committee and to what extent students should be informed of the findings.

Approximately one-quarter of the programs in this study that use an evaluation committee include student representatives as members. However, none of these programs reportedly disseminate the evaluation findings to the students who serve on the committee. Thus, it appears that students may serve as token committee representatives. Students may not receive a report of the findings or serve on evaluation committees in a majority of the programs because they are not considered mature enough to benefit from the evaluation data, responsible enough to report the findings appropriately, or concerned about the evaluation process and findings. Program directors may also be understandably hesitant to share negative evaluation data with student committee members who might relate these to others. Negative findings could be damaging if not handled appropriately and responsibly. Consequently, the lack of student representation on evaluation committees and their nonreceipt of evaluation reports may be appropriate.

Although there may be valid reasons for not including students in the evaluation process, students are likely to have a different perspective than other committee members. As direct recipients of gifted and talented instruction, they may have information or ideas

to share with the committee concerning their perceptions of staffing, instruction, and curriculum. Therefore, their participation on the committee might be beneficial to the overall evaluation process. The program also may benefit from reporting selected findings to the students. This reporting could include positive findings concerning the achievement of program goals and outstanding student accomplishments, which could create pride in the program.

There are potential benefits and potential problems related to the extent of participation students should have in the evaluation process. Students possess a different point-of-view, and their input is probably worth considering. Yet, the role of students on evaluation committees and the dissemination of program evaluation findings to them remains controversial. These issues warrant further examination and study.

Documentation Measures

The program evaluation literature recommended the use of a variety of documentation measures (Clark, 1979; Renzulli, 1975; Shwedel, 1983; Van TAssel, 1980, and TEA, 1981), and the findings indicate that a variety of measures are used. At least 50 percent of the programs employed observations, standardized tests, questionnaires, and criterion-referenced tests.

Questionnaires and observations are among the documentation measures most frequently recommended in the literature. Although some questionnaires and observations are considered subjective measures, their popularity may be related to the fact that they can be easily designed and tailored to match individual program goals. Because of this match, their use is probably justified.

The literature cautions against using standardized test scores in program evaluation (Archambault, 1984; Callahan, 1983; Renzulli and Smith, 1979; and Van Tassel, 1980). This caution is based on compatibility problems between tests based on national objectives and local program objectives which do not necessarily correspond. Yet, standardized and

criterion-referenced tests are reportedly used in a large number of programs. The relative popularity of such tests may be due to the possible naivete of directors to problems related to standardized tests, or to their perceived need for objective data to accompany subjective data, regardless of its relationship to local program and student goals resulting in the use of standardized tests despite existing problems. However, it is also possible that some program administrators have determined a specific need or benefit of using such measures in the evaluation of their particular programs and their use, therefore, may be appropriate. Nevertheless, program directors should consider the direct relevance and potential problems related to using standardized and criterion-referenced test data in evaluating their programs. They should also understand the appropriate use and relative merits of each type of test before implementing them as sources of documentation for the purpose of program evaluation.

Students products are reportedly used for documentation by only 3 percent of the programs. Some of the literature suggests using student products as a viable evaluation measure (Clark, 1979; Renzulli, 1975; Van Tassel, 1980; and TEA, 1981). It is interesting that so few programs use student products which can serve as concrete examples of student learning and performance. This lack of use possibly may be due to the subjective nature of student products or difficulties in storing, retrieving, and preserving these items. Also, in order for student products to measure improvement from participation in the program, documentation would be necessary at different times: before, during, and at the conclusion of participation. Determining which student products and how many of them to include in the assessment may further complicate their use. Although problems exist with this measure, student products may provide an additional source of documentation in the assessment of student growth and program goal attainment. The beneficial use of student products as a documentation measure is a topic in need of further study.

Sociograms reportedly are not used by any of the districts in evaluation of their gifted and talented programs, although they are suggested in the TEA guidelines. This lack

of use may be related to the lack of expertise on the part of directors in developing sociograms that are tailored to the needs of the specific programs. However, it is also likely that few, if any, districts' program objectives pertain to changing the social interaction patterns among students, which is what sociograms measure. Consequently, data that sociograms could provide would be irrelevant, and the absence of sociograms as a documentation measure in any of the programs is probably appropriate. Therefore, either the goal of changing student social interaction needs to be reaffirmed and assessed, or the recommended use of sociograms in the TEA guidelines should be re-evaluated.

Reporting of Evaluation Findings to Superintendents

A majority of the districts conducting program evaluation reportedly disseminate the findings to superintendents. However, there are a few districts in which the superintendents apparently do not receive a copy of the evaluation findings. Although this situation could suggest that these superintendents may not be aware of the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of their gifted and talented programs, it could also be that these superintendents have delegated evaluation responsibilities to the program director and actually are informed of the program's progress through conversations and meetings with the director. In any case, as the designated leader of the district, it seems that superintendents of these districts, and of the districts not currently conducting evaluation, should expect a periodic assessment of their gifted and talented programs and a written summary of the evaluation findings. Evaluation data could support any necessary actions regarding program continuance, expansion, and/or improvements. Also, the superintendent would have a specific awareness of the program's progress for the purpose of reporting to the local school board and soliciting their continued support.

Reporting of Evaluation Findings to Administrators and Teachers

In the majority of programs surveyed, building administrators and teachers of the gifted and talented receive data concerning the program evaluation findings. However, several administrators and teachers do not receive this information. Evaluation reports could provide valuable feedback to the staff directly involved with the program, especially in the areas of student identification, curriculum, and parental and community involvement, which are more controlled by the teachers and principals.

It is interesting that in some districts, individuals responsible for the day-to-day activities of the gifted and talented program do not receive evaluation findings. An evaluation report consisting of a summary and recommendations could be made available to individuals interested in the program and/or individuals who can potentially benefit from the findings, especially building administrators and teachers.

Program Evaluation Models

Although many formal program evaluation models are described in the literature (Stake, 1976; Stufflebeam, 1971; Provus, 1969; Eash, 1971; Renzulli and Ward 1969; and Parke and Buescher, 1982), there are no data available to establish either the effectiveness of these models or their usefulness in conjunction with particular programs or programs in general. However, in most cases, they have been developed by recognized authorities in program evaluation. Also, it seems reasonable to assume that these formal models are well developed for use in the assessment process. Yet a majority of programs reportedly have developed their own evaluation practices rather than utilizing those discussed in the literature. It is unreasonable to conclude that each program has developed an original formal model. It is more likely that formal evaluation models in the literature have not been reviewed seriously by the respondents, that the particular models reviewed were found to be confusing and have been discarded, or that locally developed practices have been patterned after features from the available formal models.

Locally developed evaluation models may be quite sound and functional, and, if so, should be maintained and communicated to interested educators and administrators. Otherwise, directors should re-examine their own models in light of formal models available in the literature to allow for incorporation of additional features in programs currently conducting assessments and to provide for development of sound evaluation procedures in programs that do not currently evaluate formally.

Local Budgeting for Program Evaluation

Nearly one-quarter of the districts that conduct evaluations reported that they do not specifically budget for program evaluation costs. No explanations were offered as to how the costs were paid, but apparently such costs were incurred. The lack of budgeting may partially explain the large percentages of districts that rely on informal assessments or even that perform no assessment at all. Because of the potential benefits of assessment discussed previously, budgeting for such costs should be considered. It is possible that perceived expense has reduced or restricted the practice of program evaluation in some districts. If perceived expense has been a limiting factor, then program directors should project specific costs. They may find that these costs are not as much as expected or that the costs may be minimal once evaluation procedures are implemented. After these needs have been determined, the required costs could be provided for by redirecting a portion of the existing program funds. If this redirection is not plausible, then supplemental funds could be requested specifically for the purpose of program evaluation. It is important that lack of funding not overshadow the needs for and potential benefits of program evaluation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following policy recommendations pertaining to administrators and teachers are based on the data and are intended to assist these individuals in implementing practices which will result in more effective programs.

1. Although it is clear that state legislatures and education agencies could mandate that school districts conduct program evaluations, the school reform literature suggests that "top-down" mandates are not always effective. Program evaluation practices might be more effective if local administrators and teachers of the gifted and talented recognized the potential benefits of regular assessment and voluntarily budgeted for and implemented appropriate informal and formal evaluation practices.

2. It is unclear whether administrators and teachers of the gifted and talented have been exposed to evaluation strategies in their preservice or inservice programs. Program evaluation efforts might be enhanced if assessment strategies were made an important dimension of preservice and/or inservice programs. These programs might address topics such as available program evaluation models, specific evaluation techniques, and the appropriate use and relative merits of various documentation measures.

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